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Pakistan Is Said to Pursue Role in U.S.-Afghan Talks

JANE PERLEZ

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Pakistan has told the United States it wants a central role in resolving the Afghan war and has offered to mediate with [Taliban](#) factions who use its territory and have long served as its allies, American and Pakistani officials said.

The offer, aimed at preserving Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan once the Americans leave, could both help and hurt American interests as Washington debates reconciling with the Taliban.

Pakistan's army chief, Gen. [Ashfaq Parvez Kayani](#), made clear Pakistan's willingness to mediate at a meeting late last month at [NATO](#) headquarters with top American military officials, a senior American military official familiar with the meeting said.

It is a departure from Pakistan's previous reluctance to approach the Taliban. The meeting included the chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), Adm. [Mike Mullen](#); the head of Central Command, Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#); and the commander of American and allied troops in Afghanistan, Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), the official said.

"The Pakistanis want to be part of discussions that could involve reconciliation," the official said.

Pakistan's desire to work with the United States in an Afghanistan endgame is likely to be discussed when the national security adviser, Gen. [James L. Jones](#), visits Islamabad, this week.

So far, the United States has been more eager to push Pakistan to fight Taliban than to negotiate with them, and has not endorsed Pakistan's new approach.

The Pakistani offer makes clear that any stable solution to the war will have to take into account Afghanistan's neighbors, in a region where Pakistan, India, China, Iran and others all jostle for power.

Pakistani officials familiar with General Kayani's thinking said that even as the United States adds troops to Afghanistan, he has determined that the Americans are looking for a fast exit. The impression, they said, was reinforced by [President Obama](#)'s scant mention of the war in his [State of the Union address](#).

What the Pakistanis can offer is their influence over the Taliban network of Jalaluddin and [Siraj Haqqani](#), whose forces American commanders say are the most lethal battling American and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan.

From their stronghold in Pakistan's tribal area of North Waziristan, the Haqqanis exert sway over large parts of southern Afghanistan and have staged major terrorist attacks in Kabul, American officials say.

They are close allies of [Al Qaeda](#). But they also have long ties to Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies that have protected them inside Pakistani territory.

In return for trying to rein in the Haqqanis, Pakistan will be looking for a friendly Afghanistan and for ways to stem the growing Indian presence there, Pakistani and American officials said.

In briefings last week with reporters at his army headquarters, the usually reticent General Kayani repeated his offer at NATO to play a constructive role, while making it clear Pakistan was seeking broad influence in southern Afghanistan. The Haqqani network would be one of Pakistan's strongest levers to do that.

American officials said Washington was still debating the contours of any negotiated solution. But a baseline for Pakistan, they said, would be for it to engineer a separation between the Haqqani network and the Qaeda leadership.

For the moment, the United States has been looking instead for military help from Pakistan to tamp down Taliban and Qaeda strength in southern Afghanistan, where the Haqqanis command an estimated 4,000 fighters, American military officials say.

The Americans have been pushing General Kayani to launch an offensive against the Haqqanis' base in North Waziristan.

At the Jan. 26 NATO meeting with General Kayani, American military commanders reviewed the list of hardware — MI-17 helicopters, ammunition for Cobra attack helicopters, body armor, armored vehicles — that has been put on a fast track to the Pakistani military as an inducement to take on the Haqqanis.

But General Kayani, who pleased the Americans with an operation against the Pakistani Taliban in South Waziristan last fall, was unmoved. “There is no need at this point to start a steamroller operation in North Waziristan,” he told reporters last week.

Last month he took General McChrystal on a helicopter tour over the mountains of the Swat Valley, where Pakistani paratroopers landed last summer to flush out Taliban insurgents.

The message was that the Pakistani Army still regarded India as its primary enemy and was stretched too thin to open a new front.

The reluctance to take on the Haqqanis preserves them as both a prize to be delivered at the negotiating table and a potential asset for Pakistan in postwar Afghanistan, said Syed Rifaat Hussain, professor of international relations at Islamabad University, who is close to the Pakistani Army.

“Haqqani is the guy we are banking on to regain lost influence in Afghanistan,” Mr. Hussain said. “When Pakistan says we are well positioned to help, that means the Haqqanis.”

One strand of thinking within the Obama administration calls for allowing the Pakistanis to keep the Haqqanis as part of Pakistan’s sphere of influence in southern Afghanistan, but only if Pakistan forces the Haqqanis to break with Al Qaeda and to push militants out of its areas, an American official said.

That would be a tall order for Pakistan, Mr. Hussain said. “The question is, how much influence do we have over Haqqani?” he said. “We have influence but not controlling influence.”

Since Qaeda leaders escaped Afghanistan in 2001, they have used Pakistan’s tribal areas to cement their ties to the Haqqanis and other militants, including the Pakistani Taliban.

A chilling example came on Dec. 30 when, according to American officials, the Haqqanis helped Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban stage a [suicide attack](#) at a [C.I.A.](#) base in southern Afghanistan, killing seven Americans working for the agency.

Since that attack, the Americans have escalated [drone](#) strikes in North Waziristan, with the help of intelligence provided by Pakistan, a demonstration that Pakistan’s ability to shield the Haqqanis extends only so far.

Pakistani efforts to persuade the Haqqanis to break with Al Qaeda have not made much headway, according to Pakistani intelligence and military officials, who declined to be named because they were not authorized to talk about the issue.

According to a Pakistani military official, the Pakistanis would first have to resolve where Qaeda fighters would go and whether they might be given safe passage to Yemen or another location.

As the Pakistani military works out the details of its negotiating stance on Afghanistan, Washington is taking notice, said Daniel Markey, senior fellow for South Asia at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#).

“The United States side is pretty worried about seeing a deal emerge that suits everyone other than us,” he said.